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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways that old age is portrayed in literature, focusing on how old people gradually disengage themselves from the social systems in which they live. The writers and works discussed present bleak portraits of old age in contrast to recent scientific assertions that human beings now live healthier, longer, more satisfying lives. The study concludes that if literary perceptions of contemporary life are accurate, then younger generations should not expect to enjoy their old age. (RL)

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PORTRAITS OF OLD AGE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE
(Literary Views of the Old in Isolation)

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PORTRAITS OF OLD AGE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE
(Literary Views of the Old in Isolation)

One of the most frequent observations made about the lives of old people is the narrowing of their world. They retire; they lose spouses, family, and friends; and often these losses are not replaced with other relationships. They become disengaged, a normal--but not inevitable--process of aging which has been defined by one sociologist as the "mutual withdrawal or 'disengagement' between the aging person and others in the social system to which he belongs."[1] The condition is harsh for the aged when the withdrawal is not voluntary but is forced on them by society or by families which cast them off, or when in decline they are consigned to facilities for the aged where the only outside contact for some may be obligatory visits of charity. Disengagement need not lead to dissatisfaction or unhappiness, but it often does. One of the greatest dangers is that a life centered on the self may lead to further and further withdrawal, resulting in an indifference to life itself.

Although the experiences of old age have always engaged writers, it is not surprising that with the growing significance of longevity as a social and human issue, contemporary writers are exploring more fully and more deeply what it means to be old. Historically, literature has treated old age

pessimistically, and modern literary treatment of the aged is no less pessimistic than that of earlier generations. Writers tend to ignore medical advances and the assertions by scientists that human beings now live healthier and more satisfying, as well as longer, lives. Instead, they present bleak portraits of old age; in particular, the diminished existence of those who live in physical and psychic isolation.

Concerned as he was in his poetry with diminished things, Robert Frost wrote frequently about old people. One of his most affecting and succinct statements about old age is his poem, "An Old Man's Winter Night." Here he deals with an attitude too often held by society and sometimes by the old themselves, that there is something repugnant about old age. The old man of Frost's poem, puttering alone at night in his farm house, is seen as an affront to the environment. Even nature does not favor age:

> All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
> Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
> That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.

He does not belong. His sounds are discordant, frightening nature and the house itself:

> And having scared the cellar under him
> In clomping here, he scared it once again
> In clomping off;--and scared the outer night,
> Which had its sounds, familiar, like the roar
> Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
> But nothing so like beating on a box.

The old man is an alien thing, and throughout the poem Frost emphasizes the utter loneliness of that alienation.

In one of his less familiar poems, "Archibald's Example," Edwin Arlington Robinson is concerned with an old man who in decline is, like Frost's old man, an affront to his environment. Archibald, defiantly protective of his isolation, is seen

> in his eternal chair,
> Where trespassers, whatever their degree,
> Were soon frowned out again.

Viewing the scene in front of him, he is reminded of the gnarled trees which he had reviled as blocking the sun but which had fallen long ago:

> "Trees, yes; but not a service or a joy
> to God or man, for they were thieves of light.
> So down they came. Nature and I looked on,
> And we were glad when they were out of sight.

In the remembered trees, Archibald finds a mirror of his present condition. He sees himself as a gnarled, worthless thing, a thief of light in a world that wants him out of the way. Yet his alienation and sense of diminished worth do not evoke pathos as does the condition of Frost's old man; for old Archibald accepts his condition with a matter-of-fact indifference which obviates pathos:

> "Trees are like men, sometimes; and that being so,
> So much for that."

Archibald's example, then, is that, like Camus' Sisyphus, in his response to his condition he achieves a victory over it.

Sometimes, the withdrawal of older people from the mainstream is forced upon them by the social systems under which they live. Societies, like individuals, possess a fundamental impulse to survive; and in both primitive and advanced societies

survival can mean fostering the generative forces--usually associated with youth--and expelling from the society the least productive members--usually the old people. We deplore practices of primitive societies such as walling up the aged or abandoning them without means of survival; but in her 1968 novel They, Marya Mannes takes us into a fictional world that is uncomfortably familiar and no less barbaric. The novel is meant to show America in the not distant future, and "They" are the young who control the society, ejecting all people over fifty and forcing them into self-contained communities. The novel focuses on five exiles who ultimately choose to die together with a degree of dignity rather than await their ignominious extinction. One of the group describes the situation:

> When any of us reached the age of sixty, we had to submit to a computer checkup at the Center. Those of us who were found to suffer from a mental or physical condition making us a burden to the community were painlessly disposed of. If we persisted in general health until the age of sixty-five, we were given a choice: self-disposal or compulsory liquidation.

Although they are denied contact with the larger society, the exiles draw strength from one another. They refuse to atrophy, remaining for years physically, sexually, and intellectually vital. Fearing that they might lose their faculties through disuse, they play "games for the preservation of the Self," which involve periodic deprivation of each of the senses in order to strengthen the remaining faculties. It is only when illness and terminal age threaten the group that life ceases to have

meaning for them. Until then, they display a creative will to live which defeats those larger forces that seek to deny them their existence.

Mannes wants us to see that the difference between her fictional world and our own is one of degree, and not a very great degree at that. Discussing the status of the old before "They" came to power, the narrator describes conditions which are not unknown in our society. The aged, she says, "were put, at the first faltering of mind or dribbling of mouth, into institutions of bleak horror where they died by inches in bare corridors looking at nothing. Or they were put in 'nursing' homes attended by slatterns who slapped them when they cried for help and left full bedpans in their beds for half a day."

Similarly, Eudora Welty in "A Visit of Charity" offers a grim view of institutional life. Told from the point of view of a Campfire Girl making an obligatory visit to the Old Ladies' Home, the story is a portrait of human decline and extreme isolation only dimly perceived but intuitively felt by the child. Young Marian senses that the dark, cave-like room is a place of death, but she does not understand the impotent rage of the woman Addie against her condition:

> Who are you? You're a stranger--a perfect stranger! Don't you know you're a stranger? Is it possible that they have actually done a thing like this to anyone--sent them in a stranger to talk, and rock, and tell away her whole long rigmarole? Do they seriously suppose that I'll be able to keep it up, day in, day out, night in, night out, living in the same room with a terrible old woman--forever?

For Addie, each day is an eternity of despair; and Welty makes the indignity and inhumaneness of the situation as incomprehensible to the reader as it is to the old woman.

Perhaps in part because of the proliferation of institutions for the aged, one subject which has attracted contemporary writers is the relationship of the aged to their families, particularly the situation in which the old are cast off. In its parallel plots, Shakespeare's King Lear gives the supreme example of elderly parents being dispossessed and cast off by treacherous children. In modern literature, however, the elderly parents are typically neither kings nor noblemen and are without wealth or influence. Hence, their abandonment is culturally more corrosive. The children of Lear and Gloucester coveted power and possessions. Even more insidious is the casting off of parents without substance because of the implications that the old themselves are held to be of little worth.

The heartless disregard of an elderly parent is the subject of Edward Albee's short play, "The Sandbox." The subject is framed in an absurdly comic situation: Mommy and Daddy, so-named, according to Albee, to indicate "empty affection" and the "vacuity" of their characters, take 86-year-old Grandma to the beach. In what appears to be a game, Grandma, playing dead, is unceremoniously dumped into a sandbox. It is no game at all, and the scene is the logical culmination of a relationship in which the old woman has subhuman status. She tells us:

> They took me off the farm. . .which was real decent of them. . .and they moved me into the big town house with them. . .fixed a nice place for me under the stove. . .gave me an army blanket. . .and my own dish! So, what have I got to complain about? Nothing, of course.

Albee's comic touch actually emphasizes, rather than disguises, the truth that now, Mommy and Daddy are doing literally what

they have been doing in effect: burying the old woman alive and weeping false tears while they wait for her to die.

In his novel Late Call, Angus Wilson demonstrates that the isolation of parents need not be dramatic or literal. Retired from hotel management, Sylvia Calvert goes with her husband to live with their widower son and grandchildren. Her son welcomes them, insisting that his home is now their home; yet privileges are so restricted that Mrs. Calvert is not even allowed to adjust the thermostat in a room. Harold, the son, runs the house with militaristic precision complete with a roster of assigned responsibilities. Given only minimal and token responsibilities, Mrs. Calvert senses keenly the boredom which awaits her:

> But the weeks, the years ahead, stretched out in front of her in empty uselessness. All that day she kept feeling herself too big; she seemed to have to squeeze between coffee tables, she knocked a tobacco jar off the wall windowsill, her body filled the rooms she entered so that she revolted herself--a superfluous, fat old woman.

The feeling of displacement endures until she is freed by the death of her husband, who was largely responsible for the financial bind which made living with the son necessary. The novel ends hopefully, with Mrs. Calvert looking foward to a place of her own.

All in all, Wilson's treatment of his subject is rather mild. Sylvia Calvert's experience is unhappy but tolerable and undramatic. Not so with Doris Lessing, whose writing about old age evokes powerfully the biblical injunction:

"Cast me not off in the time of old age; when my strength shall fail, do not forsake me." Although from different collections, her two stories "The Nuisance" and "An Old Woman and Her Cat" are companion pictures of the treatment of the old in primitive and English societies. In both stories Lessing writes with devastating effect about the fate of aged women. "The Nuisance" has to do with an African native and the oldest of his three wives, referred to as "the cross-eyed one." She is described as having a hideous body with breasts that were "loose, flat crinkling triangles." She "offended the sight." At the local well, the attractive young women gather sociably but the old woman is ignored. She functions as a servant to the two younger wives and as an amusing object of ridicule: "She was the eternal butt, the fool, marked by fate for the entertainment of the whole-limbed and the comely." Her husband wants to discard her, wants her to return to her people. She does disappear; and when the putridness of the well can delay its cleaning no longer, the body of the old wife is brought up in pieces from the bottom. By contaminating the well, the woman achieves a sort of bizarre vengeance for the terrible existence which drove her to this gruesome end.

For a reader who does not know Lessing, the title "An Old Woman and Her Cat" anticipates a sentimental tale. Actually, the title represents the parallel which Lessing develops

unsentimentally between the life of Hetty Pennefather and that of the stray cat she acquires. Indeed, they are both discards. Her preference for a gypsy-like life of begging and selling used clothing makes her an embarrassment to her middle-aged, middle-class children, for whom she has ceased to exist. More and more, she becomes identified with the cat, even cooking and sharing with it the dead pigeons it brings home. Together, they live the existence of stray animals in a sequence of abandoned, crumbling dwellings. Her alternative, which she rejects, is to live in a government-financed institution for the aged in which, as the housing officer acknowledges to himself, "the old were treated like naughty and dimwitted children until they had the good fortune to die." At seventy, dying and mentally cloudy, she calls out an appeal to her absent children for a room of her own. Like that of the old woman in "The Nuisance," Hetty's end is gruesome. Lessing is unsparing in her account of the discovery of the decaying, putrid corpse mostly devoured by rats. When the cat is hauled in and disposed of, the identification with Hetty is plain. No home could be found for it because, like Hetty, "he was really too old and smelly and battered."

Lessing presents the most extreme effects of human isolation and abandonment, but other modern writers show that the cutting off of an elderly person from family or from the mainstream of society need not lead to loneliness and isolation.

Exclusiveness among the old is, in fact, represented as having a salutary effect. In her 1958 novel Memento Mori, Muriel Spark establishes and maintains an atmosphere of exclusiveness, bringing the reader into the reduced, simplified lives of the elderly, who mingle only with one another. Spark diffuses the point of view among several characters, all in their seventies and eighties. Recognizing their own exclusiveness, they establish age 70 as the point of entry into their world. The subject of the novel is actually the problems of old age, specifically--to use V. S. Pritchett's words--"the corruption of the flesh, the tedium of waiting to die."[2] In dealing with their problems, Spark shows us that the similarity of their situations makes their lives interlock in a way that establishes mutual support and dependency.

In his 1974 novel Ending Up, Kingsley Amis carries exclusiveness further by having five people join together in communal living at a distance from town. Theirs is a relationship founded not on harmony of personality or interest but, in a more specific and intensified way than in Memento Mori, on mutual dependence. Their disharmony creates an abrasive atmosphere that is actually a necessary stimulant to life. It gives them an energy which, though often hostile in form, is nevetheless self-sustaining. Their lives are entwined in a fragile balance, so that once that balance is broken by the death of one of the group, the rest can no longer continue to exist. One after the other dies.

One of the most satisfying representations of the disengaged person is 88-year-old Lady Slane in Victoria Sackville-West's novel All Passion Spent. A woman whose desires have been frustrated for a lifetime, she is regarded by her children as a "wholly submissive woman," an "appendage" to her husband. When he dies, she is eager to use the freedom that is now hers. A woman of position but no wealth, Lady Slane leases a modest house, deliberately disengaging herself from her family. She says with good humor,

> I am going to wallow in old age. No grandchildren. They are too young. Not one of them has reached forty-five. No great-grandchildren either; that would be worse. . . .I want no one about me except those who are nearer to their death than to their birth.

The routine of life with her elderly maid and the regular visits from three old gentlemen with whom she has formed friendships provide Lady Slane with a contentment she has never known before. Speculating on the turn her life has taken, she concludes:

> How oddly it had come about, that the whole of her life should have fallen away from her--her activities, her children, and Henry--and should have been so completely replaced in this little interlude before the end by a new existence so satisfyingly populated! She supposed that she herself was responsible for its creation, but could not imagine how she had done it. "Perhaps," she said aloud, "one always gets what one wants in the end."

For Lady Slane, at least, the last of life is that for which the first was made.

Even this limited sampling demonstrates that literature offers experiences of aging as various as those encountered in life. Yet though the experiences are multiple, they unite in alerting us to the importance of continuing to the very end to find life worth living. The hazards of inertia and withdrawal are described by William Carlos Williams in a late poem, "Death," in which, his mind in a fetal state, he approaches nonbeing:

> So this is death that I
> refuse to rouse and write
> but prefer to lie here
> half asleep with a mind
>
> not aflame but merely
> flickering lacking breath
> to fan it--from
> the comfortable dark womb

André Maurois in "The Art of Growing Old" tells how easy it is for the aged, aware of their limited future, to develop a sense of futility and drift into a progressive withdrawal that becomes a kind of death:

> "What's the use?" says the old man to himself. This is perhaps the most dangerous phrase he can utter, for after having said: "What's the use of struggling?" he will say one day: "What's the use of going out?" then: "What's the use of leaving my room?" then: "What's the use of leaving my bed?" and at last comes "What's the use of living?" which opens the portals of death.[3]

And because each generation is a school for the generations which follow, the individual experience of old age has implications for the society as a whole. Discussing the cycle of

generations, Erik Erikson asserts:

> Any span of the cycle lived without vigorous meaning, at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end, endangers the sense of life and the meaning of death in all whose life stages are intertwined.[4]

If, then, literary perceptions of the old in isolation are representative of the contemporary situation, for younger generations the probability of a successful old age is doubtful.

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Notes

[1]M. Elaine Cumming, "New Thoughts on the Theory of Disengagement" in New Thoughts on Old Age, ed. Robert Kastenbaum (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1964), p. 3.

[2]"Introduction" to Muriel Spark, Memento Mori (New York: Time-Life Books, 1964), p. xiv.

[3]The Art of Living, trans. James Whitall (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), p. 260.

[4]Insight and Responsibility (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1964), p. 133.